

# Head of Department of Environment Urges Extreme Caution before Moving Forward with Controversial Cruise Berthing Plan

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George Town, Grand Cayman - Since its release in early June, an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) has been at the center of the heated debate over economic and environmental costs associated with the proposed port in George Town Harbor. Director of the Cayman Islands Department of the Environment Gina Ebanks-Petrie, who also headed the Environmental Assessment Board (EAB) that coordinated the impact study, is urging extreme caution before moving ahead with the project and pleading with decision makers and the public to take a closer look at what's at stake.

The EIS projects that 15 acres of protected coral reefs will be destroyed by construction and dredging, and another 15 acres are at risk. Lost will be the exceptional underwater visibility that Cayman is world-renowned for. George Town Harbour is one of the few working ports in the Caribbean, if not the only one, with crystal clear water and vibrant coral reefs within easy access of the cruise ships' anchorage.

The reefs, which include Soto's Reef, Eden Rock and the Wreck of the Balboa, are so unique because it is rare to find such well developed, high relief reefs so close to, and easily accessible from shore. These reefs have also been protected under the Marine Parks system for over 25 years so fish life is abundant and diverse. These are two of the main factors which contribute to a bustling watersports scene in the harbor. Scuba diving, snorkeling, submarine trips, glass bottom boat excursions are offered primarily for cruise ship passengers.

"If the additional 15 acres of reefs disappear, or are no longer useable because they are dead or water clarity is so poor, it will be extremely difficult to find other similar sites which could easily absorb the displaced businesses and visitors, particularly given the cruise ships' limited time in port," says Ebanks-Petrie. "Possible alternative options for snorkeling, like Stingray City, are already over-subscribed and under tremendous stress as a result."

The loss of these reefs has huge implications for the Cayman Islands on an international level. The Department of Environment has heard from international agencies and individuals during the public consultation process, and Gina Ebanks-Petrie says the vast majority urged the country not to proceed with the project because of the permanent and irreversible damage. For example, the President and CEO of PADI Worldwide "implores the Cayman Islands Government to cease plans to initiate this project and seek alternative solutions to mitigate the situation and not destroy the priceless natural underwater assets belonging to Grand Cayman Island".

"In addition to the obvious impact of the loss of these world-famous dive sites on our dive tourism

product, the biggest impact will likely be on our reputation as a jurisdiction with a long history of valuing and prioritizing the protection of its marine environment,” she said.

“Coral reefs all over the world are under serious threat on various fronts: coastal development, over-fishing, sedimentation, climate change, etc. Marine scientists are agreed that we need to take all possible steps to protect remaining reefs at the same time as taking corrective action to address the threats, both locally and globally,” added the DOE director.

Cayman’s watersports operators and local environmentalists, alarmed by the projected damage to the reefs and dive sites have organized under the banner of SaveCayman.org to fight the project and raise awareness in the community. Dock supporters point to mitigation options outlined in the EIS report, but Ebanks-Petrie cautions against misinterpreting the report.

“The pro-port side seems to take comfort from these mitigation options, but what is being missed, or glossed over, is that the environmental study also assesses the effect of those measures, and the consultants judge that they will have little or no effect on reducing the severity of the impacts,” she said. “The public and decision makers need to remember that “mitigation” of an impact does not equal complete removal of the impact, and they should focus on the severity of the predicted residual impact i.e. those impacts which remain even after the use of mitigation measures.”

“For example, the consultants score the impact of dredging on water quality in George Town Harbour (GTH) as a Significant negative impact (-D) and this remains a Significant Negative impact (-D) after the application of the recommended mitigation measure – the installation of silt curtains,” she explains. The same applies to the possible relocation of the historic Wreck of the Balboa.

Consultants classify the destruction of coral reef during dredging in the highest tier of negative impacts – a Major negative impact (-E). Following implementation of the recommended mitigation measure - the coral relocation programme – it is still classified as a Significant Negative Impact (-D).

“Even with these proposed mitigation measures, that come with a significant price tag, the resulting situation is still extremely dire, and this seems to be lost in the sound bites being heard in the news,” said Ebanks-Petrie.

Cayman already has a competitive cruise tourism product as illustrated by the industry’s own report (BREA 2012) which indicates that 90% of cruise visitors to Grand Cayman disembark while in port, and the Department of Tourism’s statistics on cruise arrivals indicate that at the end of 2015 numbers of cruise visitors will reach 1.7 million. Beyond this, numbers are set to increase, all without the construction of berthing facilities.

“The Department of Environment fully acknowledges the contribution that cruise tourism makes to the economy, and the need to upgrade and improve the arrival and departure experience of cruise visitors. However, after careful consideration of the environmental losses and the risk to the overall tourism product associated with berthing facilities, our view is that a scheme of appropriate landside enhancements would offer the best solution.”

Ebanks-Petrie says the Environmental Statement has attempted to place a dollar value on the economic losses associated with the destruction of the George Town Harbour reefs and the Statement recommends that these preliminary estimates are appropriately incorporated into the updated Business Case.

“The Environmental Impact Assessment and Environmental Assessment Board’s review of it are stunningly clear and shows that the government should not approve the plan as described,” says Dr. Ellen Prager, marine scientist and author who has been outspoken against the project. “The reefs and the wreck lost to dredging and sedimentation associated with dredging cannot be relocated or transplanted, and it is unclear what other unintended consequences to other nearshore habitats and environments will occur.”

Ebanks-Petrie says moving forward, given the projected cost of the project, it is critical that the predicted economic benefits of the berthing facility are based on real data and factual information and that the economic business case does not rely solely on assumptions, speculation and the opinions of those persons directly involved in the cruise tourism industry.

“From where I sit, the economic business case does not appear to have been held to the same standard of actual data collection and robust analysis and scrutiny as the environmental impact assessment; I see this as a significant problem for decision-makers,” said the head of the Department of Environment.

“It is our mission to inform and educate the public about Cayman’s fragile environment and to try to ensure that decisions made today, which will impact future generations, are based on accurate facts,” says Keith Sahm who is spearheading Save Cayman. “Once the decision is made, Cayman will have to deal with the consequences.”

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